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C O N F I D E N T I A L MANAMA 001170

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FOR R, NEA/ARP, NEA/PPD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/28/2016
TAGS: [BA](#) [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [BILAT](#) [POL](#) [REFORM](#)
SUBJECT: KING WEIGHS IN ON PRESS FREEDOM, CONVINCES TALK
SHOW HOST TO RETURN TO AIR

REF: MANAMA 01116

Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe for reason 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (U) Earlier this month, Bahrain Television talk show host Sawsan Al Shaer quit her popular Friday program "Final Word" after government censors cut two segments of the June 9 program which were critical of the parliament (reftel). On June 27, Arabic daily Al Ayam reported that King Hamad personally called Al Shaer to encourage her to return to the airwaves. Shaer, who is also an influential newspaper columnist, told Al Ayam that the King had told her he had reviewed and had no problems with an unedited version of the June 9 program, which featured political activist Afaf Al Jamry, a leader of the leading Shia opposition party Al Wefaq. In the censored segment, Al Jamry criticized members of parliament for debating what she considered "unimportant proposals" while not addressing pressing social issues such as poverty and unemployment.

¶2. (C) Shaer told EmbOff that the King was outraged over the decision to censor her show, saying "We have to face our problems. If information is blocked, how could I know what is going on in my country?" Shaer said the King told her he had instructed Minister of Information Abdul Ghaffar to meet with Shaer to ask her to accept a proposal to resume as host of "Final Word." Shaer told the King she would honor his request to return to the air.

¶3. (U) On June 28, Al Ayam reported that Bahrain Journalist Association Chairman Isa Al Shaiji described the King's initiative as "a victory for the national democratic process and freedom of expression." Information Minister Abdul Ghaffar told on-line publication "Elaph" that the decision to stop the program had been made in his absence and added that the King had ordered him to resume broadcasting Shaer's show.

¶4. (C) Comment: Shaer is one of Bahrain's most prominent and balanced columnists, and is occasionally critical of the government on a variety of issues. Her talk show is often a forum for debating hot and controversial topics. The King's deliberate public entry into the debate to reaffirm his previously expressed support for a free press is likely to make journalists breath easier in Bahrain. It may also embolden critics of government-sponsored efforts to assert more control and encourage self-censorship of the press, as reported in reftel.

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